

Why we need term limits

By [MacMillin Slobodien](#)

Most Americans understand that politicians really like being politicians. Elected officials enjoy generous [salaries](#), lots of vacation time and, of course, political power. For these reasons, among others, politicians are unlikely to voluntarily leave the cushy jobs they have. Once elected, most politicians also benefit from name recognition and increased fundraising prowess. These advantages result in high re-election rates for incumbents. Recent scholarship by Doug Bandow and Karl Kurtz shows that in the 1960s and 1970s, the average [state legislature](#) only experienced a turnover of one-third of its members every two years. During the 1980s, turnover declined considerably, and by 1988, average turnover had fallen to only 16 percent of state legislators. Overall, during the 1980s, 99.3 percent of unindicted Congressional and state legislative incumbents won re-election. High re-election rates for incumbents continue to this day and create something resembling a ruling [class](#). Because of high incumbent re-election rates and voters' perception that lawmakers have become too powerful, term limits have re-emerged as a salient issue in today's public policy debates.

The term limits movement dates back to the 1990s. In 1995, a slim 5-4 majority on the U.S. Supreme Court derailed the movement at the federal level by ruling that state-initiated [Congressional](#) term limits are unconstitutional. Nonetheless, 15 states have since adopted term limits and the movement resurfaced in 2010 at the federal level, as the populist Tea Party seized upon term limits as one instrument through which America's political system could be restored to its founding principles.

While opponents of term limits challenge their value on the grounds that they strip legislative bodies of seniority and experience, it is not surprising that these opponents, for the most part, are made up of a politicians, legislative staff, bureaucrats, [journalists](#), and interest groups that depend on politicians for employment, patronage, sources, and votes.

Other scholarship on term limits, including a [paper written](#) by Patrick Basham for Our Generation (an advocacy group that has 75,000 members nationwide who support term limits at all levels of government), shows that term limits foster more energetic, independent, and effective legislative bodies. The research also demonstrates that term limits stimulate electoral competition, enable nontraditional candidates to run for seats in state legislatures, weaken the leadership control of state legislatures, and promote public policies compatible with limited government. Term limits also lead to the election of candidates with real-world experience over [career politicians](#), as has been borne out in the 15 states that have legislative term limits.

The term limit movement is back, and it's changing our country's political culture for the better.

MacMillin Slobodien is the Executive Director of Our Generation, a 75,000-member non-profit free market advocacy group that supports term limits at all levels of government